

## Baseball player Xander Bogaerts: a hero in Aruba

By Erik Neuteboom

**ORANJESTAD — In the story below, two worlds come together in a beautiful way: my world as a boy in the Netherlands who falls under the spell of baseball in the 1970s and later even sees a game in American professional baseball in Canada in 1999 (between the Toronto Blue Jays and Cleveland Indians), and my world in Aruba since the end of October 2017, where I as a baseball fan discover how important baseball is in Aruba, and how proud they are of their Aruban top baseball player Xander Bogaerts who won the World Series twice with Boston Red Sox, and with the Netherlands became world champion in 2011!**

In January 2018 I had a special meeting, in the visitor center of the Aruba National Park. A few times I saw a tall, dark-hued and athletically built man in his twenties walking around, with a towel around his head like a turban. At one point he sat down across the street from where my wife and I were. I took an-

other good look at him, excitedly nudged my wife and said "That's Xander Bogaerts, from the Boston Red Sox, I'm going to ask him if he is!" I walked up to him, he gave me a friendly look, I asked him, and with a smile he confirmed my suspicion. We had a nice chat, I told him that I have been a baseball fan since I was 10 because my cousin was a pitcher for ADO and later the Dutch national team. And that I have become a fan of Boston Red Sox since he started playing there as a pro in 2013, and immediately won the World Series in the first year. He said he was thrilled that the Arubans here are so proud of him, and he sees people wearing Boston Red Sox caps and t-shirts everywhere. I thanked him for the conversation, a moment later I saw Xander with a lady (his sister Sandra?) driving away in an open jeep, he saw me taking a picture and waved happily to the lens, without any doubt sympathetic.

### Family practice

A month later I was driving

back from a nature photo safari, and saw some very serious baseball players playing on a small baseball field near us, maybe 2-3 miles from our house. I decided to take a look, and to my surprise, Xander Bogaerts was there, practicing fanatically in such a typical "baseball cage". As it turned out, the other two men were his twin brother Jair and a cousin. Jair first played with Xander at Boston Red Sox and then with Chicago Cubs (in 2012) but never in the former, so he quickly switched to "representative in the sports world", with Xander as a brother he had many connections. That cousin played at Atlanta Braves, but not at the highest level either, so Xander was the only one. It was nice to see how relaxed the three family members interacted with each other, but with a Xander who practiced his 'swing' very fanatically in between. I was allowed to take some pictures and wished them good luck..

### Down to earth

Again a month later I saw Xander walking at that sports field, he was heading towards the nearby sports / fitness center. He looked relaxed so I went up to him and he recognized me. I told him that in Aruba I like to take pictures of the shoco (the unique Aruban burrowing owl). That appealed to him because he said he saw them often when he was growing up as a little boy in San Nicolas, in the south of Aruba. I showed him some photos right away, he thought they were very beautiful. It was so special for me to be in this place, far from the busy outside world, on an almost deserted sports field, completely relaxed with one



of the most appreciated young players in the highest American professional baseball league. He really is a star. Xander makes many millions (through a lucrative 6-year contract), but he remains very "down-to-earth", absolutely no fancy talk or arrogance. How different from some young Dutch footballers who are often

puffed up and simply walk on with headphones when young fans want an autograph, scandalous! Xander also does a lot for the youth in Aruba, he has donated money in his hometown San Nicolas for a beautiful baseball field for the youth, which also bears his name.

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